

Middletown's History and Potential for Rail Service

The following report is a summary of the history of rail in Middletown, the trends facing rail today and impact on the future.

1850-1873: Riverport Rail

Modes of transportation were changing, the riverfront became a node for a new transportation use, rail. A line from the north was established in 1850 with a railroad depot on North Main Street with the line extending across Bridge Street and continuing south along the riverfront ending at the intersection of Ferry Street and Water Street.ⁱ

In the years before the Civil War (the 1840s and 1850s) developments in transportation and manufacturing laid the groundwork for industrial expansion. In 1835 a group of Middletown citizens, who saw the declining importance of water transportation, met to discuss ways of connecting Middletown to other urban centers by railroadⁱⁱ.

In 1846, the New York and Boston Rail Road Company proposed a rail line from New Haven to Windham with a drawbridge at Middletown. Middletown voted to contribute \$897,000 to the effort in 1847, but Connecticut Governor Toucey vetoed the act to allow the line, claiming that no bridge should be constructed at any point below Harford, since it would hinder shipping traffic on the Connecticut River. The veto was overturned, but charter for the rail line would need to be renewed seven times between 1848 and 1868. The clause regarding the bridge was repeatedly challenged.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1850 a branch line did connect Middletown to the New Haven Hartford rail line and is shown in the 1851 map below.



For many years to follow, Middletown and the surrounding towns struggled to obtain a main trunk line between New York and Boston, which would bridge at Middletown and give the city access to important markets. These efforts were embodied in the "Air-line Railroad", first organized rather ambitiously, as

the New York and Boston Railroad in 1846, and under a variety of other names through the nineteenth century. To this initial enterprise Middletown contributed \$897,000, a considerable expense whose lack of return had a negative effect on the local economy^v. The \$897,000 investment in the Airline Rail line failed to produce enough interest to cover the bonding Middletown issued for the investment. The result was higher taxes that “stifled development and ill-kept streets”.^{vi}

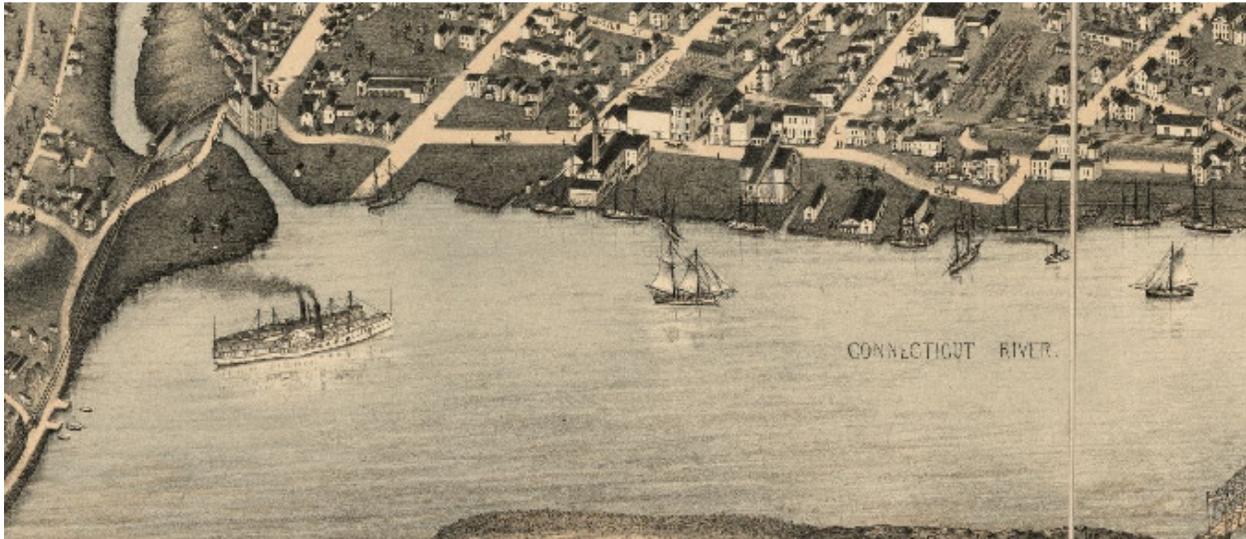
The Air Line was beset by financial problems and with difficulties in obtaining a charter from the Legislature to construct a bridge across the Connecticut River. As a result, a through line from New Haven to Boston, bridging at Middletown, was not completed until 1873. By that time, main trunk lines had already been established through Meriden and Hartford and along the shoreline. Middletown’s failure to gain an early through connection prevented the tremendous industrial growth which cities like Hartford and Meriden experienced, and is in large measure responsible for the city’s more modest development^{vii}. The photograph below shows the airline rail bridge in the background with the branch line in the foreground with box cars loading or unloading to the docked ships on the riverbank.



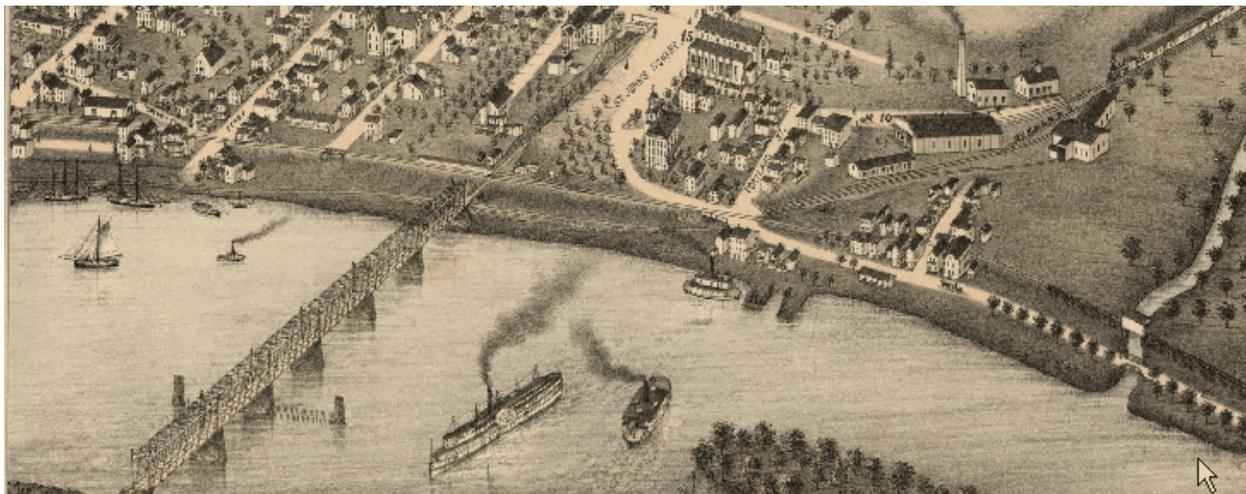
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1873-1920: Riverport to Industrial Hub

Middletown's location within the larger transportation network, river boat access, rail access, bridge crossings, gave Middletown a competitive advantage for the development of industrial commerce. The 1875 Fitzgerald and Dillon Middletown Directory listed 20 manufacturers operating in Middletown. In 1920 the Price and Lee Company Middletown Directory reveals that the number of manufacturers increased by 110% to 42 manufacturers. The following images from a 1877 birdseye view of Middletown shows intermodal network of river transport and rail transport in close proximity to factories and warehouses.



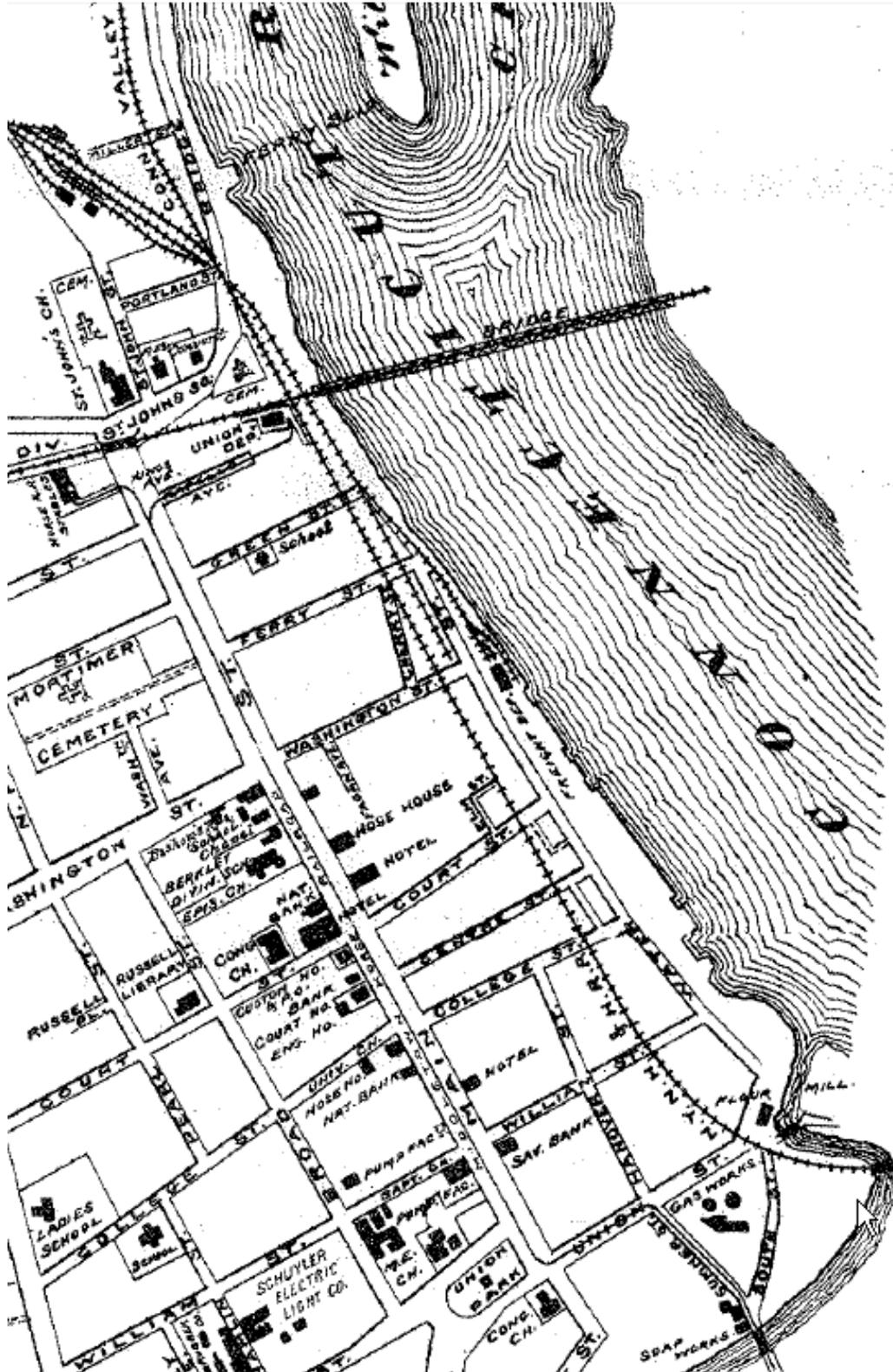
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In the 250th anniversary history of Middletown described the development along the riverfront as “The river bank, once so proud in its beauty, like the elder sister in the fairy tale, has become the grimy Cinderella, pressed into service of the gnomes and elves of modern industry. The shriek of the iron horse is daily echoed by the White Rocks, and the view that used to range across green pastures to the quiet blue water, is now obstructed by a tall embankment and a coal wharf.”^{xi}

a Price and Lee Directory map from 1888 shows airline bridge across the Connecticut River and the Connecticut Valley extending southward beyond where the older branch line stops. A new train station depot has been built at the crossing of the Airline and Connecticut Valley tracks.



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The finished bridge north of the airline bridge is shown in the following photo. A train platform and train are seen in the photo as well. Middletown was served by passenger rail service until the 1930s or 1940s.



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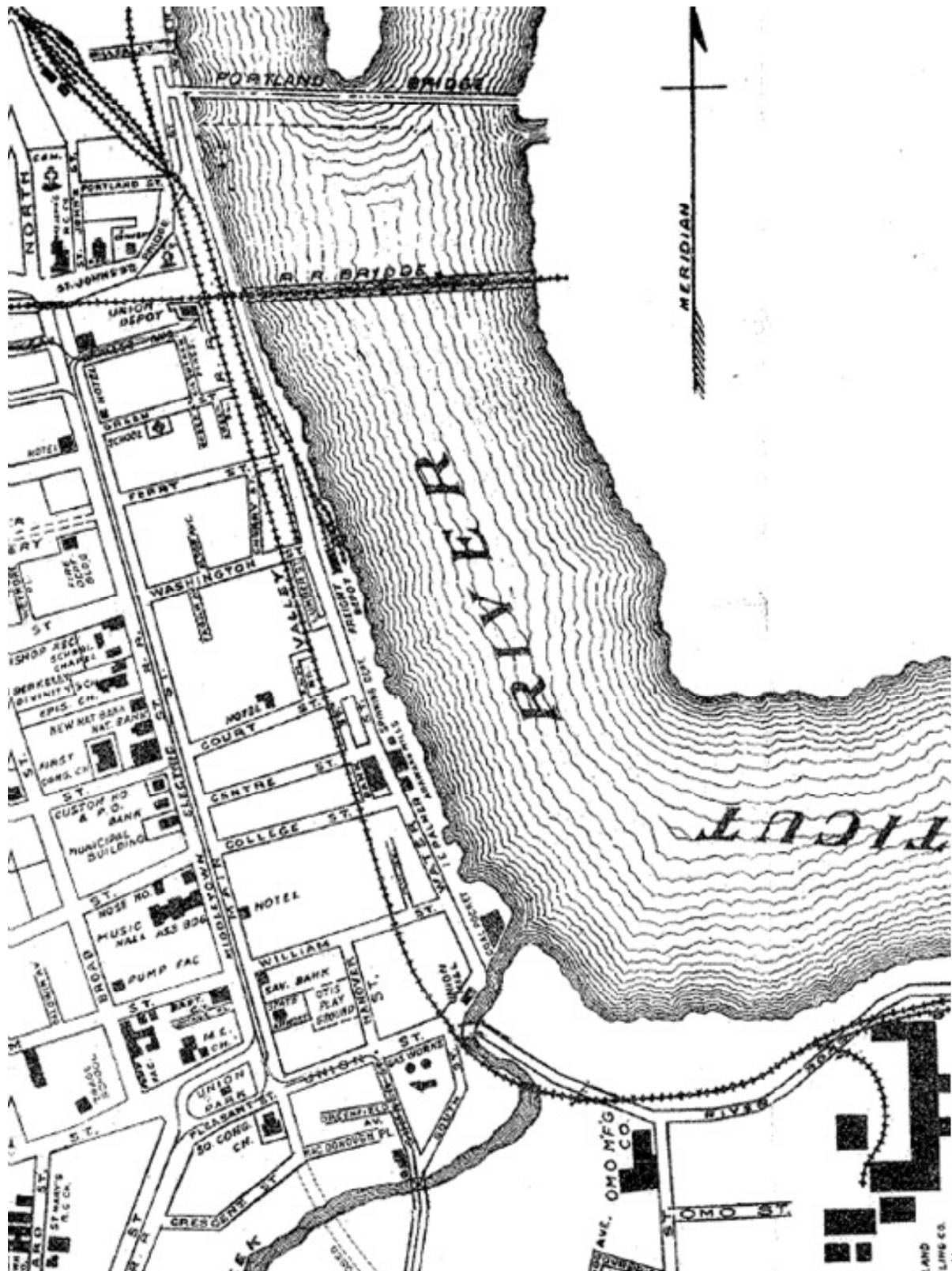
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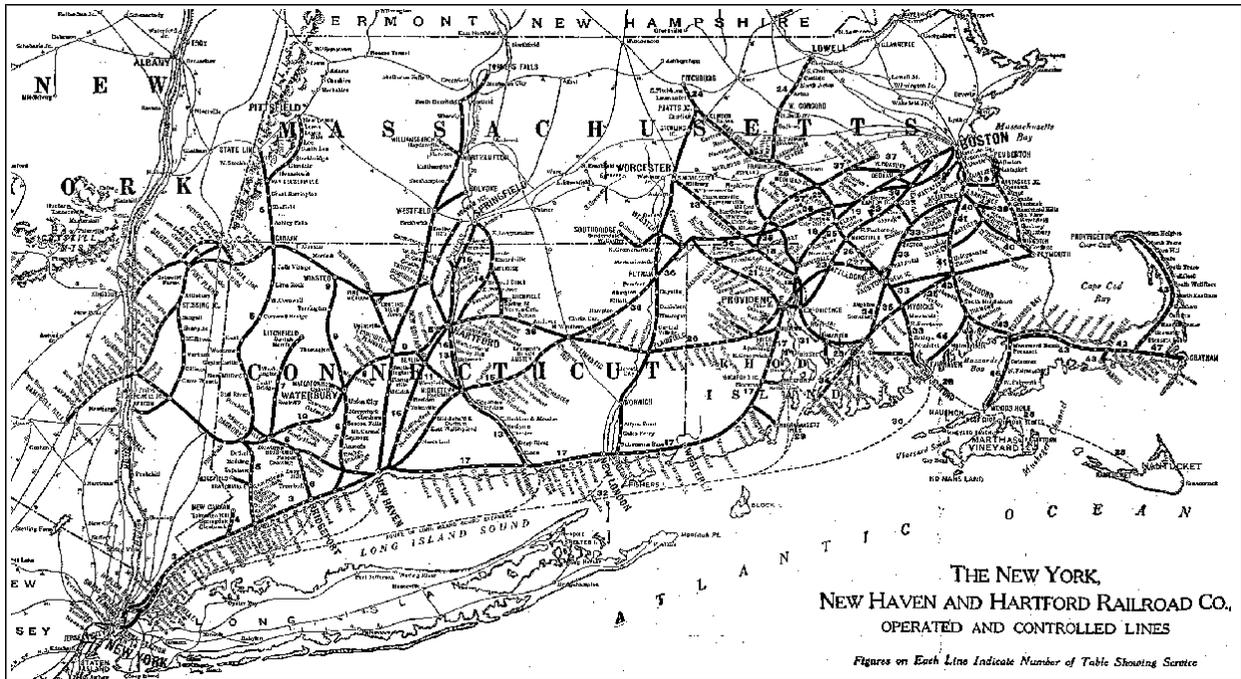
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The eastern end of Rapallo Avenue where the Middletown Union Train Station was sited became a local transportation hub for rail. “Boston and New York trains passed through on east-west tracks. On the tracks north and south came the Hartford and down-river trains. The South Farms and Asylum trolley lines had their terminals there. The Meriden and Hartford and Portland Trolleys passed by the station. The Hartford trolley used the New Haven road tracks as far as Cromwell, there departing to go separate way through Cromwell and Rocky Hill’s Main Street, and thence through Griswoldville and Jordan Lane into Hartford. The Meriden trolley used the New Haven road’s track as far as Westfield, and then went its own way to the Meriden railroad station. In addition, there was the West Side Lakeview trolley which ran a roundabout route from Pine Street, through Cross, Mount Vernon Streets, Washington Terrace, Park Place, Lincoln, High and Grand Streets, through Main Street, Church and South Main Streets, Russell Street and Ridge Road to what is now Crystal Lake. That had a pavilion and amusement center that attracted many Middletown people and added to the company’s revenues.”^{xvi}

The following map, a Price and Lee Directory map from 1925 now shows the two bridges across the Connecticut River and the expansion of development south of Sumner Brook.

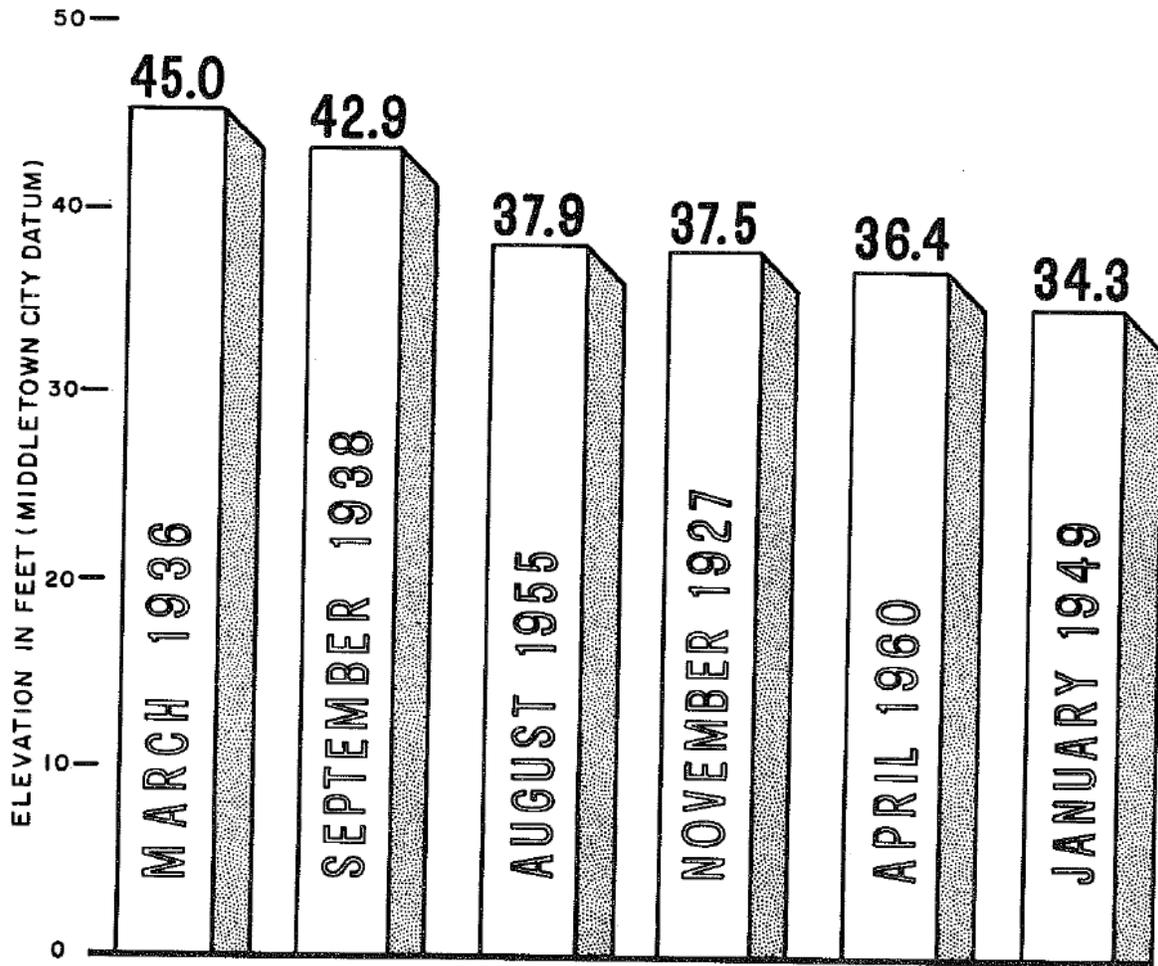


The following map shows the rail network in southern New England in 1929.



1920-1943: Second Decline: Industrial Hub to Urban "Slum"

As a result the river's annual spring freshettes and increasing incidents of extreme flooding, slowly forced an end to the waterfront as a place of private business. The following chart from a Redevelopment report for Center Street Redevelopment shows the major flooding events during this period.



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This map shows the extent of the flooding in the 1936 flood, shown as red.

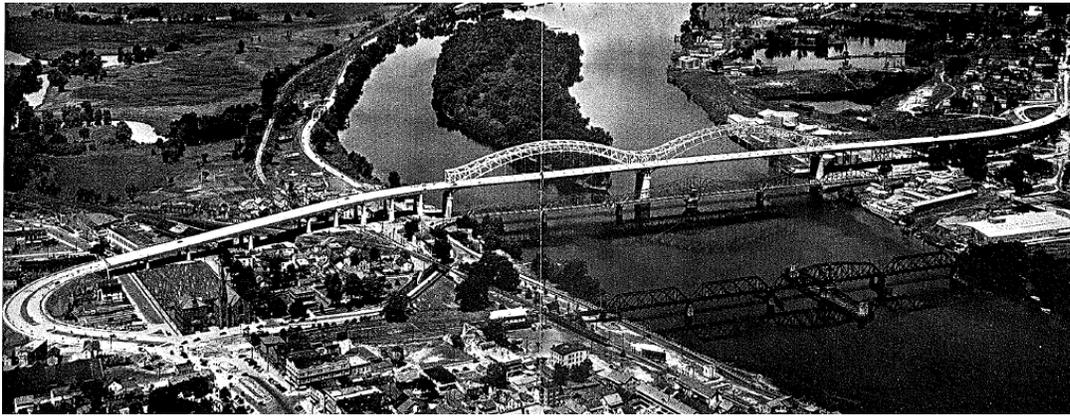
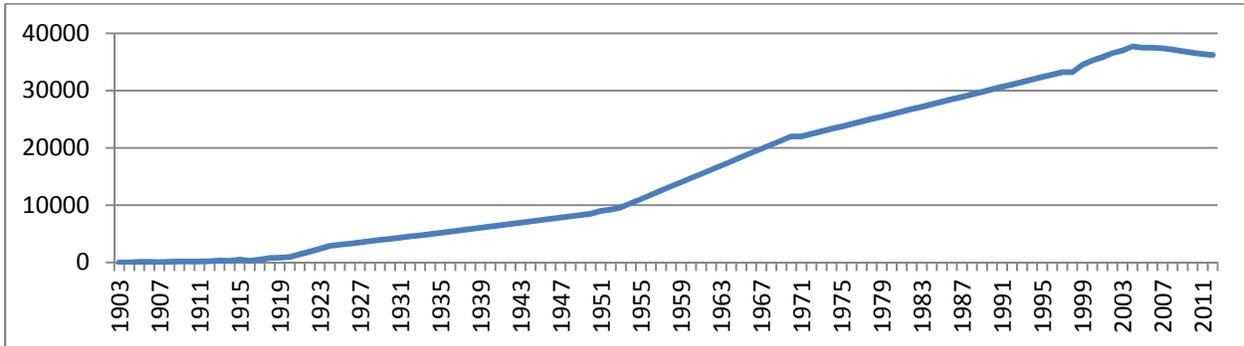


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The waterfront was seen as an ideal location to develop new infrastructure to support the growth of the City and accommodate the needs of an automobile oriented economy. Automobile registration began in the State of Connecticut in 1903. In 1903, 23 cars were registered in Middletown or one car for every 200 households. Since then registration grew to where there was a 1 vehicle for every 10 households in 1917. In 1924 there was 1 vehicle for every 2 households. In 1941 there was 1 vehicle for every

household. In 1961 there were 1.6 vehicles for every household and then registrations peaked at 1.8 vehicles per households in 2004, where there were 37,677 registered vehicles. In 2013 there are 1,454 fewer registered vehicles than the peak in 2004 (1.7 vehicles per household).

The following aerial is from 1934.



October 28, 1943

V CITY PLAN COMMISSION of MIDDLETOWN

The regular meeting of the City Plan Commission was held in the Mayor's Office on October 28, 1943 as 7:45 P.M.

PRESENT: Mayor Cubeta, Commissioners Russell, Hennessey, Hippler and Warner. Guests: Dr. & Mrs. Thomas H. Reed, from the Connecticut Public Expenditure Council of Hartford.

6. RIVER AREA; A scenic Highway along the river to Essex should be included as a STATE Project, with Middletown improving that part within its jurisdiction. This might be done by Zoning- due to floods this land is not suitable for housing; and should be zoned for "Recreational, Dock and Landing Facilities" on the basis of being too expensive to maintain Flood Control and the health conditions.

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This increase in vehicle ownership force development farther from nodes of rail and water transportation, so new highways and bridges were needed for the increased traffic. More development required other infrastructure such as sewage treatment. The waterfront seems in an ideal location to solve some of these problems.

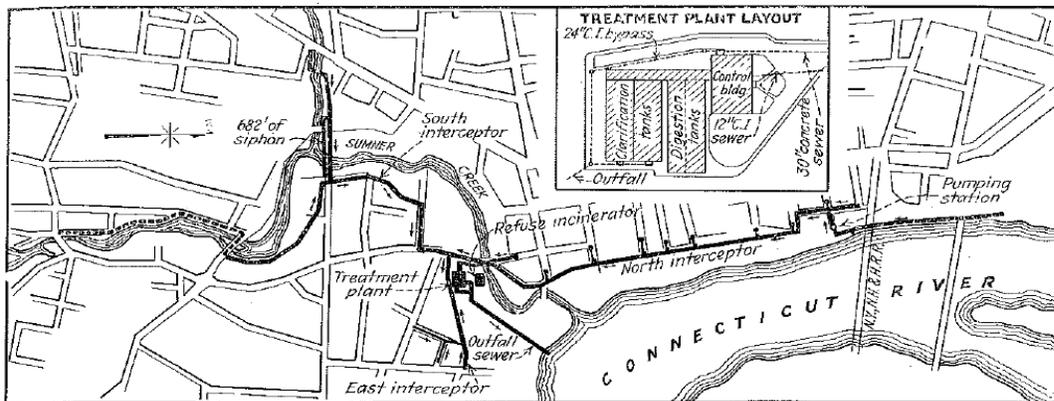
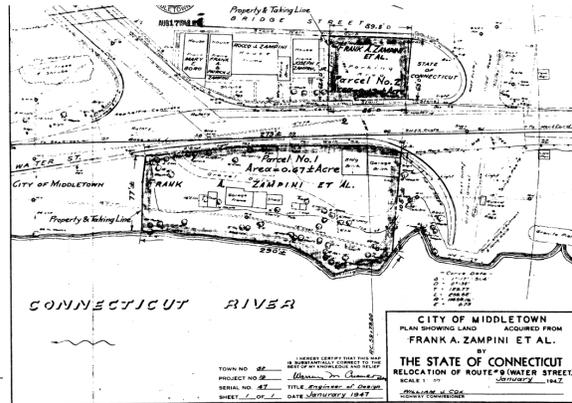
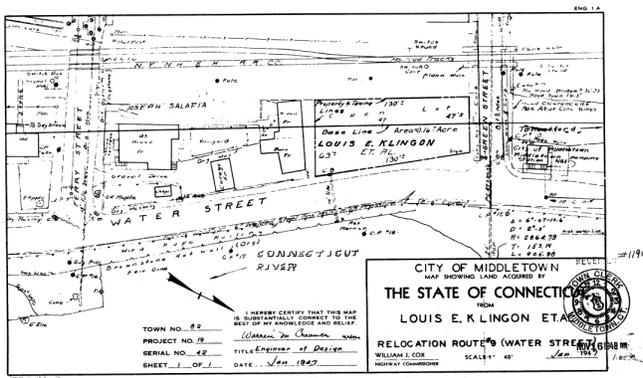


FIG. I. LOCATION PLAN OF INTERCEPTING SEWERS AND GENERAL LAYOUT OF SEWAGE DISPOSAL PLANT

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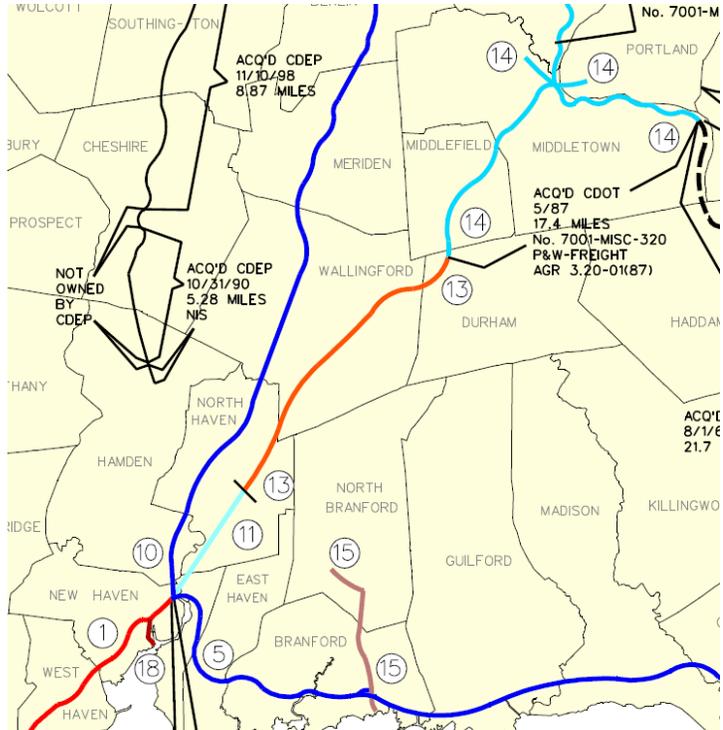
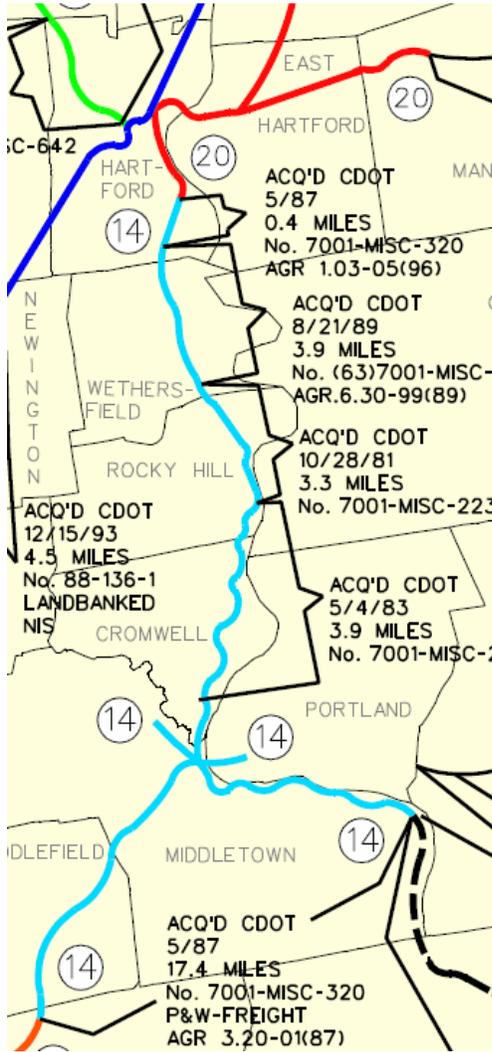
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Soon after in 1951 Connecticut Highway Route 9 was completed. In 1945, the Middletown Yacht Club vacated their building along the river. The American Legion rented the building. The narrow strip along a heavily travelled roadway, with a concrete plant located just to the south, became overgrown and recreational programs were limited to an occasional dog obedience class in the deteriorated Yacht Club building.^{xxvi}

The 1955 General Plan recommended that the “riverfront, itself should be put into recreation and park use, and the riverfront should be opened up to provide the vista to the south. ... The area between Acheson Drive and the river, in the vicinity of Sumner Creek is in need of redevelopment. Possible uses include both light industrial and recreation or park reserves.”^{xxvii}

In 1961 there were 1.6 vehicles for every household and then registrations peaked at 1.8 vehicles per households in 2004, where there were 37,677 registered vehicles.

By the 1970s and 1980s rail service was in serious decline, to the point that the State intervened and began to purchase the ownership of private rail lines. The following page shows the sections and dates of acquisition by the State.



In 1994, the Common Council created a taskforce to explore options for the rail cluster in Middletown. In 1996, the State created a taskforce to investigate and report recommendation on the how rail could be revived in Connecticut, which came to the very similar conclusions as the Middletown taskforce.

Railroad Potential

Middletown's experience suggests that it may be possible to restore abandoned railroad depots and warehouse sites to their original uses. And statistics suggest that the state's rail freight industry is rebounding, reversing decades of decline. As highway congestion has increased travel time, the railroads have managed to cut costs and improve service. In the process, they have become a viable alternative for moving bulk over long distances at competitive prices.



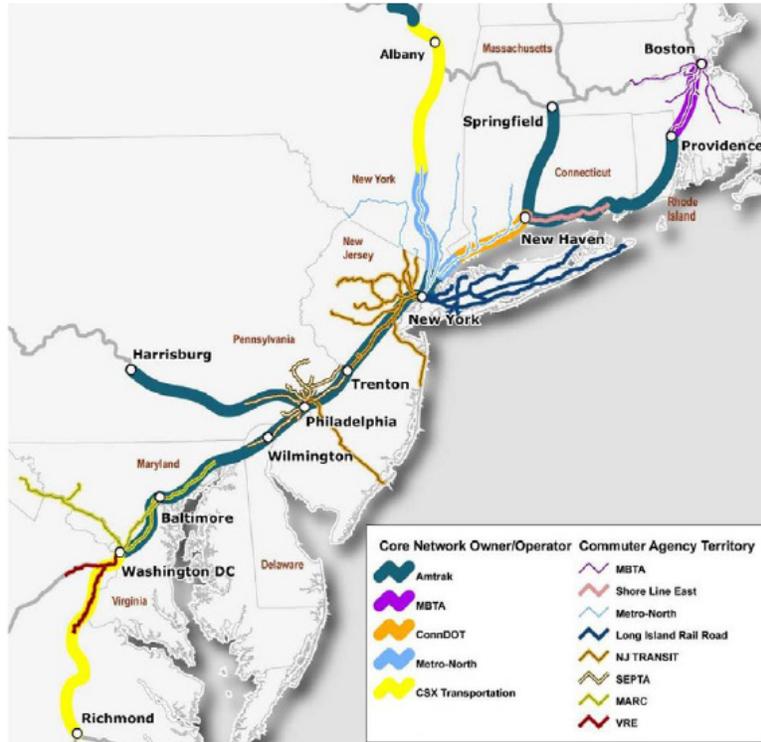
But, unlike highways, the state does not plan and build railroads. Rather, it acquires and holds abandoned tracks for resale to private operators, a policy know as rail banking. The policy relies on market forces to stimulate demand for rail services. DOT's job is to complement those forces by preserving abandoned lines until the demand for rail service leads private operators to re-acquire them. DOT also regulates these operators and helps them obtain federal funds, which have been cut, to upgrade or extend the tracks. It does not stimulate demand by promoting railroads to various businesses.

The industry's potential could be stymied by federal and state cuts for repairing railroad tracks and bridges. Repairing the rail line running north of Middletown could reduce shipping costs while providing rail service to manufacturers in the Rocky Hill area, explained William Kuehn, Middletown's development director. Cargos destined for locations north of Middletown must now take a circuitous route. They must travel south to Old Saybrook, where they must switch onto the Amtrak line heading east to New Haven. At New Haven, they must switch again onto the line heading north.

2013 and beyond- Possible return

Looking back, transportation patterns and trends are never set forever, they change with the times. Today changes in transportation are underway again that could impact rail potential. In 2013, there are 1,454 fewer registered vehicles than the peak in 2004 (1.7 vehicles per household). Locally vehicle miles traveled have decreased. Could these changes result in changes for the future of transportation?

Looking nationally there is interest and spending in high-speed rail connecting cities could change the climate for rail in Connecticut.



The Connecticut State Rail Plan targets the Middletown Cluster for possible future commuter rail service.

Other Corridors

The Department has identified several corridors as candidates for potential future commuter rail service. With increased demand for passenger service within Connecticut, there may be added benefit to initiating service on connecting rail lines near major cities. Many cities had rail lines that radiated outwards from the city similar to spokes on a wheel.

Hartford has many rail lines that connect to Amtrak's Springfield Line. Potential service that could be operated on these rail lines includes the Griffin's Line, Manchester Secondary (link Hartford with major stations at Mansfield (University of Connecticut) and Uncasville (Mohegan Sun Casino), Armory Branch Line, Terryville Secondary (Waterbury-Bristol-Berlin-Hartford), Middletown Secondary, and Suffield Line (Bradley Airport connection). Planning for improved service on the NHHS Line has included development of a transit connection from the Windsor Locks station on the NHHS line to Bradley Airport. Currently plans include a shuttle bus connection from the station to the airport terminal. Over the long term, the Department plans to assess the feasibility of creating a rail connection to the terminal.

Other cities such as Danbury, Waterbury, New Haven, Middletown, New London, and Willimantic have potential for future rail service on multiple rail lines that do not currently have passenger service operated on them. There has been interest and discussion on a few of these lines in particular, such as Danbury-New Milford²⁹, Waterbury-Bristol-Berlin-Hartford, New London-Willimantic-Palmer, Massachusetts, and Groton – Worcester.

Freight service may also be reviving in Connecticut and while the data is incomplete, 2010 was the first year of increased freight tonnage on Connecticut rail lines.

Annual Connecticut Rail Freight Tonnage

Freight Carrier	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Pan Am Southern Railway (estimate)	223,860	223,860	223,860	223,860	223,860	223,860
Providence & Worcester RR	1,850,000	1,850,000	1,850,000	1,850,000	1,853,000	2,005,000
CSX Transportation	1,105,000	1,081,200	994,500	956,250	810,000	810,000
Central New England RR	181,730	181,220	181,730	172,321	189,000	162,000
Connecticut Southern Railroad Co.	2,210,000	2,252,500	2,210,000	2,125,000	1,710,000	1,710,000
Housatonic RR	513,480	530,880	512,040	412,560	305,880	339,240
New England Central RR	1,066,700	1,160,600	1,024,427	1,085,782	950,000	980,000
Tilcon/BSRR (estimate 2009/2010)	2,500,000	2,200,000	1,800,000	1,600,000	1,400,000	1,300,000
Total	9,650,770	9,480,260	8,796,557	8,425,773	7,441,740	7,530,100

The coming years may be the best opportunity in a generation to plan for the new chapter in the history of rail in Connecticut and in Middletown, but it would require a cooperating at the State and regional level. Moreover, this effort would need to create the framework that can establish successful public-private partnerships to overcome the challenges of infrastructure improvements and service delivery.

Middletown's place in the bigger picture is in flux, but there are a number of possible outcomes.

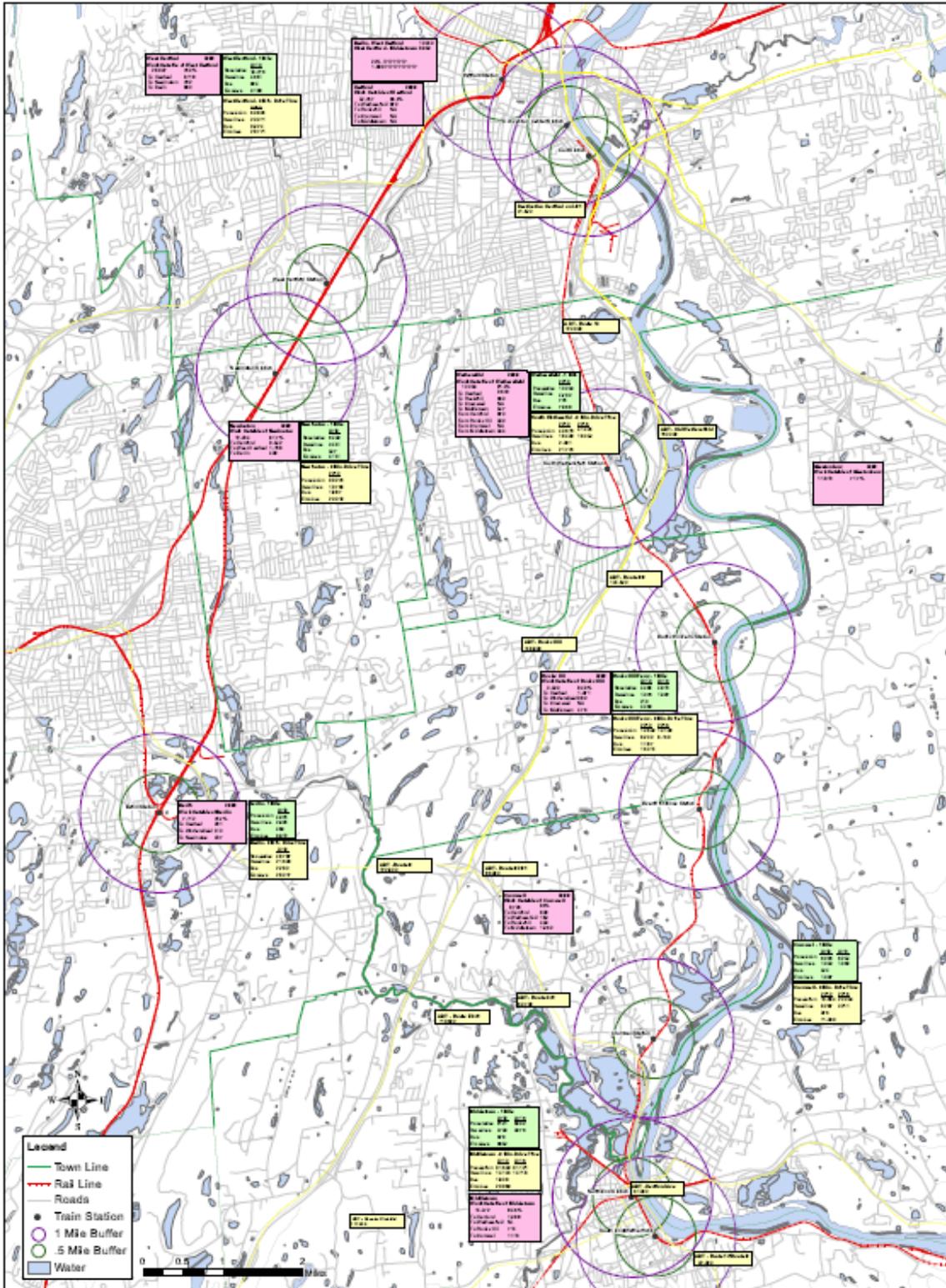
- 1) Nothing changes.
- 2) Middletown becomes a freight route from New Haven to Middletown at the expense of commuter rail.
- 3) A bus-way is established south of Hartford, depressing State interest in investing in a commuter rail line south of Hartford.
- 4) Commuter branch line is established between Hartford and Middletown to support the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield line.
- 5) Passenger rail is reestablished between Hartford and Old Saybrook.

The following tables summarized the population base that would be served by a Hartford-Middletown Commuter Line.

2000 Commuters	Commuting to Hartford	Commuting to Wethersfield	Commuting to Rocky Hill	Commuting to Cromwell	Commuting to Middletown	Total
Hartford	X	879	727	98	386	2,090
Wethersfield	3,576	X	289	61	254	4,180
Rocky Hill	1,971	389	X	236	475	3,071
Cromwell	800	160	428	X	1,059	2,447
Middletown	1,986	254	714	1,115	X	4,069
Total	8,333	1,682	2,158	1,510	2,174	15,857

2010 Populations	1-Mile Radius	5-Min Drive
Hartford Colt Station	17,075	101,669
Wethersfield- South Station	10,229	42,513
Rocky Hill- Ferry Station	4,484	19,540
Cromwell- Center Station	5,205	18,554
Middletown- Downtown Station	5,141	31,526
Total	42,134	213,802

The following map shows the possible commuter rail link between Middletown and Hartford.



Possible train station locations in Downtown Middletown.

Rapallo Avenue



- Site is constrained and two of the three parcels would need to be acquired.
- 1,700 feet between the Portland Street at-grade crossing and the Washington Street at grade crossing.
- Little to no on-site parking potential

DeKoven Drive between Washington Street and Court Street



- City-owned, no acquisition required.
- 1,600 feet between the Washington Street at-grade crossing and the Route 9 MLK Exit at grade crossing.
- Adjacent to public parking.
- Would require abandoning a section of DeKoven Drive.

DeKoven Drive near Union Street



- Require acquisition of two parcels.
- 450 feet between the Portland Street at-grade crossing and the Washington Street at grade crossing.
- Constrained site.
- In the flood zone.
- Little to no on-site parking potential.

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- ⁱ North Middlesex History and Program: The Connecticut Tercentenary 1635-1935. William Aitken. 1935.
- ⁱⁱ "History of Middletown" B.A. Cleary, 1979.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Centennial, The Middlesex Mutual Assurance Company. 1836-1936.
- ^{iv} Map of the city of Middletown, Connecticut from original surveys by R. Whiteford, surv'r, New Haven. Watson's Lith. 1851
- ^v "History of Middletown" B.A. Cleary, 1979.
- ^{vi} Centennial, The Middlesex Mutual Assurance Company. 1836-1936.
- ^{vii} "History of Middletown" B.A. Cleary, 1979.
- ^{viii} Photo of Airline Bridge. With railline, with box cars and docked ships in the foreground 1873.
- ^{ix} Birdseye View of Middletown, 1877.
- ^x Birdseye View of Middletown, 1877.
- ^{xi} 1650-1900 Mattabeseck. Middletown, 1900.
- ^{xii} Price and Lee Map, 1888.
- ^{xiii} Airline Bridge,Portland Passenger Bridge and Train Station, 1899.
- ^{xiv} Middletown Railroad Station, looking east, Airline Rail Bridge in background.
- ^{xv} Middletown Railroad Station, looking south.
- ^{xvi} Means of Travel Have Changed Radically Since First Settlers Arrived on Scene, Middletown Press, Saturday Evening, September 9, 1950.
- ^{xvii} Price and Lee, 1925
- ^{xviii} Center Street Project: Floods on the Connecticut River At Middletown, 1960
- ^{xix} Hartford Avenue, 1927 Flood.
- ^{xx} Hartford Avenue, 1936 Flood
- ^{xxi} Floodlimits, 1936.
- ^{xxii} The Middletown Portland Bridge. August 6, 1938.
- ^{xxiii} Post War Plan- Planning and Zoning Minutes October 28, 1943.
- ^{xxiv} Sewage Disposal at Middletown, By Thomas Bowe. Engineering News Record December 23, 1937
- ^{xxv} 1960s Center Street Redevelopment
- ^{xxvi} Harbor Park Expansion. 1991
- ^{xxvii} General Plan of the City of Middletown, 1955.